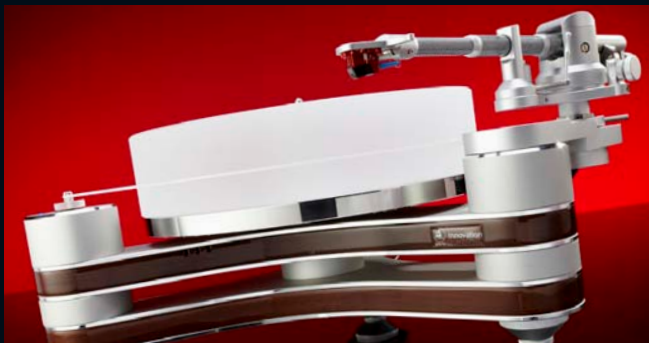


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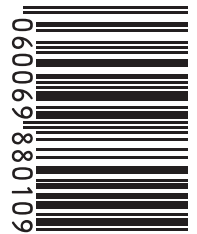


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Metronome

KALISTA INTEGRATED

Radical French styling disguises an extraordinary digital source

Price £38,825 **Contact** Absolute Sounds ☉ 020 8971 3909 ☉ www.metronome-technologie.com

By our estimation, Metronome Technologie is France's most ambitious and aspirational CD player manufacturer: you only have to look at the design this, its only integrated player, to get the picture.

The price is pretty revealing too: although the company does make more accessibly priced players, they aren't in the striking Kalista Integrated form. This is effectively a Kalista CD transport combined with an onboard digital to analogue converter. The two are externally identical in every respect except for the XLR sockets on the Integrated.

There are two boxes to this player, but not in the usual transport and DAC fashion. One relatively plain – but in fact superbly executed – chassis contains the power supplies, while the more elaborate box does the disc reading, conversion and contains both digital and analogue outputs. This is an eminently intelligent approach: because power supplies are inclined to pollute audio electronics with their low voltage signals, keeping the electrically noisy elements away from the highly sensitive ones should ensure a cleaner signal. Power supplies are what differentiates Metronome components: no other manufacturer to our knowledge makes so much effort to deliver clean and stiff power to the front end.

The Integrated only has balanced outputs, and inverted ones at that. Why they are upside down isn't clear, but neither is it an issue unless you have a particularly recalcitrant XLR plug to remove. The only other outputs are digital. These are offered in the popular electrical S/PDIF and AES/EBU variants, alongside AT&T optical, the connoisseur's choice.

The player has a lid, but this is effectively a dust cover and isn't used when listening. Instead you get to see the disc spinning away and need to put the acrylic and stainless puck on before the motor gets started. This happens faster than expected, no more than five seconds. The blue light that emanates from a stub behind the transport isn't there to help you locate the disc, but to counteract diffracted light from the reading laser. Other high-end players have LEDs in the disc compartment for the same purpose, but the Kalista's is particularly obvious.

Construction is heavyweight and precisely executed. The three, stainless steel supporting legs are 78mm in diameter and their spiked tips are intended to sit in Delrin pucks which are supplied for the purpose. Two slabs of acrylic provide a second stage of isolation and these support a Philips CDM12 Pro 2 transport and the solid slab of aluminium that houses the control electronics and the DAC. Metronome does not indicate the exact DAC it uses but says that it's a 32-bit/96kHz upsampling type, making it pretty unusual.

SOUND QUALITY

It's not clear why this substantial player should warrant its asking price on first spin, but 24 hours later all becomes clear: this assembly of acrylic, stainless steel and aluminium is the greatest digital contribution to road safety that we've encountered. It has an extraordinary ability to bring out all the musical detail and ignore the limitations of the recording. Discs that seem grating and flat, often ones of albums that

we adore on vinyl, suddenly turn into a totally different musical experience.

The last remastering of Steely Dan's *Countdown to Ecstasy* has never matched ancient vinyl played on a decent turntable, but now it at least equals it and frankly improves on the power and extension of the bass. We literally couldn't bring ourselves to press stop or fast forward, even for the opener *Bodhisattva* which usually seems dry and lifeless. The dynamics and timing qualities of this player have the ability to revive such productions comprehensively.

With less emotionally distracting material it is clear that the Kalista Integrated is an extremely revealing player. Bass performance is in a class of its own and this influences pretty much everything you play. In particular, pianos that usually seem on the thin and clanky side develop more body and

"Discs that seem flat turn into a totally different musical experience"

depth. This is because the treble itself has more substance and three-dimensionality. This also means that the player has extraordinary imaging capabilities: the voices of singers occupy a definite acoustic space that is projected into the room in a disbelief suspending fashion. It's quite uncanny – it even had us listening to opera for far longer than duty required!

Other decent disc-spinners sound distinctly messy around the edges in comparison. They add a hash to the presentation that is not normally apparent but becomes all too clear when you put the disc onto the Kalista. It begs this question – what can the separate Kalista transport and Metronome Technologie DACs do to better it?

This also brings the issue of diminishing returns into sharp relief. This player is probably only 10 per cent better than something at a quarter of the price, but it is distinctly better; there's no getting away from it. Better in terms of timbral, spatial and temporal resolution and notably better in terms of sheer engagement with the music. The price may be stunning but the sound is even more so. ■■

Jason Kennedy

